

Political Polarization: Governance and Society

◦ Outline:

① Introduction

Thesis statement: Political polarization takes its roots from the core issues such as corruption and nepotism, religious extremism, ethnic conflicts, political turbulence, and socio-economic problems that operate in the society. However, its impacts are largely witnessed on the overall fabric of society which results in creating wide gaps and different groups. Hence, it must be addressed by strengthening the democratic institutions and local governance, promoting resilience and political dialogue, ensuring rule of law and justice system, harnessing social media responsibility, and addressing the drivers of socio-economic issues.

② Decoding Polarization and its meaning

③ Types of Polarization

④ How polarization impacts the governance and society?

⑤ Issues of Polarization in Pakistan:

(a) Unscrupulousness and Improbability in Pakistan

- Case in Point: Report of Transparency International Corruption Perception Index (CPI) - Pakistan ranks at 127/175 position in corruption index

(b) Sectarian conflicts

- Case in Point:

- (i) Killings in Hazara, Quetta
- (ii) Shia-Sunni conflicts during 1980-1990

(c) Bigotry and Religious Fanaticism

- Case in Point:

- (i) Salman Taseer's assassination over blasphemy law in 2011 by his body guard
- (ii) Tehreek-i-Labaik protests in Pakistan during 2017 and 2021

(d) Political rhetoric and slogan politics.

(e) Political turbulence

- case in point.

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- (i) 1977 coup (Zia v. Bhutto)
- (ii) 1999 coup (Musharraf v. Nawaz Sharif)
- (iii) 2016 Panama Papers
- (iv) 2022 - No confidence motion
- (f) Socio-economic inequalities
 - Case in Point:
 - (i) Feudal dominance in Karachi (Sindh) and Punjab
 - (ii) Underdevelopment of Balochistan
- (g) Economic context
- (h) Mass-media
- (i) Modicum respect for Constitution:
 - Case in Point:
 - (i) 1958 martial law
 - (ii) 1973 constitution and martial law by Zia-ul-Haq

⑥ Recommendations to address Political polarization in Pakistan:

- (a) Strengthening democratic institutions and local government
- (b) Promoting resilience and Political dialogue
- (c) Reform political parties
- (d) Foster attitudinal changes in politicians
- (e) Ensure rule of law and justice system

- (f) Harness social media responsibility
- (g) Address socio-economic drivers of polarization
- (h) Build a culture of civic engagement

① Conclusion



As General Pervez Musharraf writes, "Polarization has already made Pakistan all but ungovernable". Polarization in Pakistan is not a new concept. It has been operating in the country since its inception and until now, it has adopted its horrible form. Polarization in Pakistan can be dated back to 1960s when there was a clash between two groups i.e; conservatives and socialists. This clash was primarily based on an ideology which created a rift in the society. Furthermore, the separation of East Pakistan, nowadays called Bangladesh, was also driven by ethnic conflicts, which eventually led to the separation of two federating units in Pakistan. In addition to this,

the elections of 1977 present no different story. The opposition led by Zia-ul-Haq i.e. Pakistan National Alliance accused Zulfikar Ali Bhutto of rigging the elections and misuse of authority. This Islamization project created a divide between society and its different groups. In Pakistan, political party affiliation has become the only source of social identity. It is this process where political groups disagree on key instances which are necessary for the welfare of public. Pakistan, despite establishing strong defence, and state-building, is unable to establish social cohesion and integration in the society. Political polarization takes its roots from the core issues such as corruption and nepotism, religious extremism, ethnic conflicts, political turbulence and socio-economic problems that operate in the society. However, its impacts are largely witnessed on the overall fabric of society which results in creating wide gaps and different groups. Hence, it must be addressed by strengthening the democratic institutions and local governance, promoting resilience and

political dialogue, ensuring rule of law and justice, harnessing social media responsibility and addressing the drivers of socio-economic issues.

Polarization is the process in which society blindly starts following the one group in a tunnel visioned manner. It is caused by the high level of disagreements among political parties on important issues, and characterized by the creation of different groups in a society due to beliefs, ideology, and ideas. People in this specific state of affairs become very intolerant and radicalized in terms of different opinions and beliefs. In a less dynamic society, where polarization takes place, it helps in establishment of social groups and forces, eventually resulting into the social and political cohesion. However, in the case of Pakistan, this is not the scenario, consequently, it becomes more alarming for the society.

With regards to the types of polarization, there are four types, but majorly it is divided

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into two categories i.e. elite polarization and mass polarization. Broadly, 'ideological polarization' pertains to the division in political beliefs, while 'Affective polarization' relates to the strong dislike or hostility towards opposing groups. In addition to these types, elite polarization refers to the polarization among formal political actors, including politicians, political parties, and institutions. Further to it, there is mass polarization. It occurs within society at large. On the other hand, it is also believed that there is top-down polarization in Pakistan. It originates from political elites and institutions and is passed down to the public. Thus, elites help in shaping the narrative of masses in Pakistan and overall the globe.

Having discussed the political polarization and its types, it is important to highlight that how governance and society are impacted by the polarization. **Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblitt** write in their book, "How democracies die" writes

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"Polarization can destroy democratic norms. When socio-economic, racial, or religious differences give rise to extreme partisanship, in which societies sort themselves into political camps, whose world views are not just different, but mutually exclusive, toleration becomes harder to sustain. Stable partisan rivalries eventually give way to perceptions of mutual threat. As mutual tolerance disappears, politicians grow tempted to abandon forbearance and try to win at all costs". ^{Thus,} the whole fabric of society deteriorates over time and governance becomes weak. The trend of polarization fuels violence and radicalization, thereby weakening the democratic institutions and functioning of society as a whole.

To highlight the issues of polarization in Pakistan, the first in this regard is the unscrupulousness and improbability in Pakistan.

Nepotism and corruption are the biggest threats to Pakistan's political system. According to a report presented by Transparency International's corruption perception index, Pakistan

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ranks 227/275 in global corruption index. As a result of this, Pakistan is exposed to face its impacts which include poverty, unemployment and illiteracy. Politicians manipulate the masses and buy political votes, consequently manipulating the whole electoral process. It, therefore, results in lack of accountability, weak democratic institutions and deepening of political polarization and social divisions.

Furthermore, sectarian conflicts are the major destabilizing factors in Pakistan. Pakistan has been the victim of these conflicts from the past 50 years. It is quite evident that Pakistan is composed of diverse cultures, ethnicities, and classes. Due to the tribal systems in the rural areas, Pakistan seem to contain people from almost every culture and ethnicity. However, due to this, the society becomes more polarized and intolerant. It leads to several intra-tribal and cultural conflicts causing killings of innocent citizens at great level. As evident in the

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case of killings in Hazara and Shia-Sunni conflicts in 1980's. Hazara has been experiencing the mass killings of its Shia-community members due to the intolerance between both groups. Furthermore, Shia-Sunni conflicts in 1980's were triggered during Jihadis movements and formation of groups at that time which fueled extremism and intolerance. Hence, this is ^{also} one of major factor creating political polarization in Pakistan.